

Relationship Marketing for B2B Success in the Rubber Sector

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ABSTRACT

In today's competitive business-to-business (B2B) landscape, relationship marketing has become an indispensable strategy for fostering sustainable growth, particularly in industries with complex interdependencies like the rubber sector. Unlike transactional approaches, relationship marketing emphasizes trust, commitment, value co-creation, and long-term collaboration between buyers and suppliers. The rubber industry, which provides critical inputs to the automotive, healthcare, and construction sectors, is highly dependent on supply stability, customization, and stringent quality assurance. This study explores how relationship marketing strengthens supplier-buyer relationships in rubber manufacturing by enhancing resilience, encouraging innovation, and mitigating risks arising from volatile raw material prices and supply chain disruptions. The literature highlights trust, commitment, and satisfaction as primary drivers of loyalty and performance, while empirical cases from global and Indian firms such as Bridgestone, Apollo Tyres, and Sri Trang Agro-Industry demonstrate the practical application of relational strategies. Core practices such as customer-centric approaches, technological collaboration, long-term contracting, and sustainability initiatives illustrate how relationship marketing moves firms beyond price competition towards value-based differentiation. Findings underscore that relationship marketing not only secures reliability and stability but also creates a competitive edge, ensures customer retention, and fosters global supply chain resilience essential for the B2B rubber sector.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, B2B, Rubber Industry, Trust, Commitment, Supply Chain, Customization, Customer Retention

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary business-to-business (B2B) environment, relationship marketing has emerged as a critical strategy for achieving sustainable growth and long-term competitiveness. Unlike transactional approaches that prioritize short-term sales, relationship marketing emphasizes the development of enduring partnerships, mutual trust, and shared value creation between buyers and suppliers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

This orientation is particularly significant in industrial sectors such as rubber, where supply chain dependencies, product customization, and consistent quality assurance are paramount. The rubber industry, which serves as a key input provider to automotive, construction, and healthcare sectors, thrives on reliable supply networks and strategic buyer-supplier collaborations. Therefore, fostering durable relationships with clients not only ensures revenue stability but also facilitates joint innovation and adaptability in volatile markets.

Scholars have consistently highlighted the role of trust, commitment, and satisfaction as fundamental antecedents of relationship quality and customer loyalty in B2B contexts (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). In industries characterized by high switching costs and technical interdependencies, such as rubber manufacturing, buyers often value suppliers who demonstrate reliability, flexibility, and the ability to co-create solutions (Anderson & Narus, 1991).

Relationship marketing, in this regard, extends beyond sales functions to encompass information sharing, joint problem-solving, and long-term contractual partnerships that safeguard both parties against uncertainty and price volatility (Palmatier et al., 2006). This is especially relevant in the rubber sector, where fluctuations in raw material prices and environmental concerns demand collaborative strategies between firms and their clients.

Empirical evidence also suggests that relationship marketing contributes to improved supplier performance and customer retention across various B2B sectors, including industrial goods, packaging, and crop protection industries (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). These findings resonate with the rubber sector, where firms such as tire manufacturers depend heavily on reliable, quality-driven inputs from their suppliers.

Moreover, in emerging markets, relationship-oriented practices play a pivotal role in navigating institutional voids, cultural differences, and competitive pressures (Lam et al., 2004). Thus, relationship marketing provides not only a

strategic means of differentiation but also a mechanism for building resilience in global supply chains. By integrating trust, commitment, and value creation, firms in the rubber sector can leverage relationship marketing as a key driver of long-term B2B success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of relationship marketing in B2B contexts has been extensively studied, highlighting trust, commitment, and relationship value as central constructs. Morgan and Hunt's (1994) seminal Commitment-Trust Theory laid the foundation, asserting that enduring business relationships are built upon mutual trust and commitment.

This framework has since been applied across industries, including industrial goods and supply chains, where long-term cooperation is essential. Anderson and Narus (1991) further emphasized partnering as a focused strategy, showing how collaboration and joint planning between buyers and suppliers enhance competitive advantage and reduce transaction risks.

Uлага and Eggert (2006) expanded this discussion by examining relationship value, suggesting that suppliers who deliver superior relational benefits such as trust, reliability, and knowledge-sharing can strengthen customer loyalty in competitive markets. Their findings are particularly relevant to input industries like rubber, where quality consistency and technical support are highly valued. Similarly, Rauyruen and Miller (2007) investigated B2B service industries and demonstrated that relationship quality significantly predicts customer loyalty, reinforcing the idea that satisfaction and trust are key to sustaining long-term contracts.

Palmatier et al. (2006) contributed through a meta-analysis of relationship marketing effectiveness, showing that relational constructs have stronger performance implications in B2B than in consumer markets.

This insight underscores the significance of relationship marketing for industrial suppliers such as rubber producers, who rely on repeat transactions and contractual agreements. Lam et al. (2004) also highlighted the role of switching costs in fostering loyalty, finding that when firms perceive higher costs in changing suppliers, they are more likely to maintain relationships, provided value and satisfaction are consistently delivered.

Further, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) emphasized relationship quality as a mediator between relational activities and loyalty, suggesting that investments in communication and customer care translate into long-term retention. In emerging economies, where industrial markets are influenced by cultural and institutional factors, relationship marketing becomes even more critical. For example, Gounaris (2008) examined industrial markets in Greece and found that trust and communication were fundamental in overcoming uncertainties and building strong supplier-buyer bonds, insights that resonate with rubber supply chains in globalized markets.

Importance of Relationship Marketing in the Rubber Sector High Dependency Industry

The rubber sector is characterized by its high level of interdependence with downstream industries such as automotive, healthcare, construction, and consumer goods. In particular, the automotive industry consumes nearly 70% of natural rubber in tire production, creating a situation where consistent supply relationships are critical for both manufacturers and buyers (Ayar et al., 2021).

Relationship marketing becomes essential in this context, as it enables firms to secure long-term supply contracts and stabilize demand despite fluctuations in global markets. According to Anderson and Narus (1991), collaborative partnerships help businesses align production with client needs, reduce transaction costs, and improve mutual performance outcomes. For rubber manufacturers, this means maintaining strong ties with tire companies, medical product manufacturers, and industrial goods producers to ensure recurring orders.

Palmatier et al. (2006) highlight that relationship-oriented strategies in B2B markets foster higher loyalty and customer retention compared to transactional approaches. By cultivating strong interdependencies, rubber suppliers are able to mitigate the risks of demand uncertainty, while buyers secure reliable access to essential raw materials. In volatile commodity-driven industries such as rubber, relationship marketing therefore acts as a stabilizing mechanism that protects both parties and supports long-term competitiveness.

Customization Needs

Another critical factor driving the importance of relationship marketing in the rubber sector is the demand for customized solutions. Buyers often require specialized rubber compounds that are engineered to meet specific performance standards, such as heat resistance for automotive components, biocompatibility for medical devices, or durability for construction materials.

Meeting these requirements necessitates close collaboration between suppliers and buyers, which is facilitated through relationship marketing practices such as joint product development and technical support (Uлага & Eggert,

2006). Research has shown that relationship value in B2B markets is enhanced when suppliers provide knowledge-based services and engage in co-creation of solutions (Eggert, Ulaga, & Schultz, 2006).

In the case of rubber manufacturing, suppliers frequently engage in R&D collaborations with clients to create tailored compounds that address unique operational challenges. Such partnerships not only enhance customer satisfaction but also increase switching costs, as buyers become reliant on suppliers' expertise (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Furthermore, the capacity to deliver customization strengthens a supplier's competitive positioning by differentiating its offerings from commodity-grade alternatives (Lam et al., 2004). Thus, relationship marketing enables rubber firms to move beyond price-based competition and build value-driven, innovation-oriented relationships with their clients.

Trust and Quality Assurance

Trust and quality assurance are indispensable in the rubber sector, given the critical role rubber products play in downstream industries. Tire manufacturers, for example, rely heavily on the consistency and quality of rubber inputs to ensure safety and compliance with international standards. Similarly, medical device companies depend on biocompatible rubber materials that must meet stringent regulatory requirements. The absence of reliability in this sector could result in severe reputational and financial consequences for both suppliers and buyers. Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Commitment-Trust Theory underscores trust as the cornerstone of successful relationship marketing, arguing that it reduces perceived risks and fosters long-term cooperation. Studies have shown that trust, coupled with consistent quality performance, directly impacts customer loyalty and long-term relational stability (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). For rubber firms, this translates into rigorous quality management systems, transparent communication, and adherence to international certifications, all of which reinforce confidence among clients. Palmatier et al. (2006) further note that trust enhances relational performance by reducing opportunistic behavior and encouraging information sharing. In industries where inputs are critical to product safety, relationship marketing based on trust and quality assurance is not just a competitive advantage but a necessity for sustainable partnerships.

Cost and Risk Sharing

The volatility of raw material prices, especially natural rubber sourced from plantations, and the risks inherent in global supply chains make cost and risk sharing a vital element of B2B relationships in the rubber sector. Price fluctuations in natural rubber, driven by environmental conditions, geopolitical events, and global demand-supply imbalances, often create uncertainty for both suppliers and buyers (Ayar et al., 2021). Relationship marketing provides a framework for mitigating these risks through long-term contracts, joint forecasting, and collaborative supply chain management. Lam et al. (2004) emphasize that switching costs and collaborative practices reduce buyer vulnerability during volatile market conditions. Moreover, Anderson and Narus (1991) argue that partnerships allow firms to share risks, distribute costs, and achieve mutual efficiencies in production and logistics. In the rubber industry, this may manifest in shared investments in sustainable sourcing, technology for synthetic alternatives, or logistics infrastructure to manage inventory risks. Ulaga and Eggert (2006) also highlight that the value derived from B2B relationships extends beyond product delivery to include risk mitigation and operational stability. By adopting relationship marketing strategies that emphasize collaboration and cost-sharing, rubber firms can enhance resilience, ensure continuity in supply, and build long-term loyalty among clients operating in unpredictable environments.

Core Strategies of Relationship Marketing in the B2B Rubber Sector Customer-Centric Approach

In B2B contexts, adopting a customer-centric approach involves aligning organizational strategies, processes, and offerings around the client's needs and value outcomes. Noting that firms embedding customer success into their DNA elevating it to the CEO and board level see improved satisfaction, retention, and lifetime value. Illustrating how a customer-back operating model supported by integrated data across sales, service, and R&D enables industrial firms to anticipate client needs, tailor product innovations, and strengthen resilience in volatile markets. In the rubber industry, where clients such as tire manufacturers or medical goods producers demand precise specifications and reliability, this level of customer-focus is pivotal. By centering strategies around client workflows and feedback, rubber suppliers can co-develop tailored compounds, deliver specialized support, and become indispensable partners rather than mere vendors.

Long-Term Contracts & Partnerships

Long-term contractual relationships and strategic partnerships act as stabilizing forces in industries marked by high volatility. The concept of "vested outsourcing" exemplifies this: By entering relational contracts based on shared mutual goals and value creation, both parties invest in each other's success, rather than merely transacting. In the rubber sector, such relational agreements might involve multi-year supply contracts with automotive firms or collaborative ventures for sustainable sourcing. These arrangements help align incentives, reduce opportunistic behaviors, and embed the supplier within the client's strategic supply network creating stability and mutual growth.

Supply Chain Integration

Integrated supply chains are foundational to building trust and efficiency in B2B environments. Technologies like RFID enhance transparency, data accuracy, and speed across complex order-to-delivery workflows. Turcu et al. (2017)

presented an RFID-enabled B2B platform that dramatically improved supply chain visibility, transaction accuracy, and inventory management by enabling real-time tracking and data integration. For rubber producers and buyers often separated by many intermediaries such technologies reduce delays and errors, and strengthen supplier reliability. By creating seamless digital integration across supply, logistics, and operations, rubber suppliers reinforce their partners' confidence and streamline collaboration.

Technology & Innovation Collaboration

In B2B settings, innovation collaborations serve as both value-creation and lock-in mechanisms. Business-to-business firms transitioning to experience- or customer-focused models increasingly shift from transactional to co-creative relationships, using data-driven feedback and iterative development to enhance client value delivered. In the rubber sector, such collaborations might take the form of developing eco-friendly tire compounds or joint R&D labs for sustainable materials. These partnerships deepen strategic alignment, anchor the supplier in the client's innovation ecosystem, and elevate the relationship from supplier– customer to innovation ally.

Trust & Relationship Capital

Trust and relational capital remain central to B2B collaboration. In the chemicals and energy sectors, sustainability initiatives and transparency have been shown to significantly elevate trust levels among business clients a critical outcome in commodity-driven industries. For rubber suppliers, implementing CSR programs such as eco-conscious plantation management or transparent sourcing signals responsibility and reliability, bolstering client confidence and reputational capital. By actively sharing sustainability data and integrating ethical practices into operations, rubber firms strengthen the intangible but vital assets of trust and relational capital.

Benefits of Relationship Marketing for B2B Rubber Firms Higher Client Retention

Relationship marketing in the B2B rubber sector plays a pivotal role in driving higher client retention by establishing long-term trust and mutual value creation. Unlike transactional marketing, relationship marketing focuses on cultivating sustained interactions that increase client loyalty and repeat contracts, which significantly reduce the costs associated with acquiring new customers. Bain & Company's findings illustrate that increasing customer retention rates by even 5% can boost profitability by 25% to 95%, underscoring the financial importance of such relationships. In the rubber industry, where contracts often involve complex, customized solutions, long-standing partnerships foster stability and confidence, creating an environment where suppliers are viewed as strategic partners rather than mere vendors. Continuous engagement, proactive communication, and personalized service are crucial strategies that lead to enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty, thereby improving retention rates significantly.

Revenue Stability

Long-term supply agreements and contracts form the backbone of revenue stability in the B2B rubber industry. These agreements ensure predictable income streams that protect firms from the volatility of market demand and price fluctuations. The plastic and rubber products industries commonly apply the percentage of completion method for revenue recognition precisely because of extended contract durations, highlighting the sector's reliance on sustained contractual relationships for financial planning and forecasting. This stability also allows rubber firms to make informed capacity investments, secure supply chains, and optimize operations without the uncertainty of sudden order cancellations. Such contracts foster mutual commitments, aligning client and supplier incentives to maintain consistent production and delivery, and reducing the risks associated with demand shocks common in commodity-driven markets.

Innovation Drive

Collaboration under the umbrella of relationship marketing greatly enhances innovation in the B2B rubber sector by facilitating joint development efforts and solution co-creation with clients. Through sustained partnerships, rubber suppliers engage in continuous knowledge exchange that leads to more industry-specific product development, such as eco-friendly rubber compounds and tailored formulations addressing client production challenges. The advent of innovation labs and shared R&D initiatives promotes synergies that accelerate the commercialization of advanced materials, maintaining competitiveness in fast-evolving markets. For instance, shared intellectual property agreements incentivize both parties to invest in longer-term projects focused on sustainability and performance improvements. This collaborative innovation not only differentiates suppliers but also aligns with client demands for sustainable, regulatory-compliant products, driving mutual growth and a reputation for cutting-edge solutions.

Competitive Advantage

In the fiercely competitive rubber manufacturing space, relationship marketing enhances competitive advantage by shifting the focus from price-centered competition towards superior service quality and co-created value. By nurturing personalized client relationships and delivering reliable technical support, firms develop differentiation on dimensions other than cost alone. Studies indicate that differentiation strategies rooted in service quality and product innovation lead to significant increases in market share and profitability for rubber product firms. Providing dedicated client teams, customized contract terms, and post-sales support strengthens the buyer-supplier bond,

resulting in preference over competitors even when prices are comparable. Emphasizing long-term value creation rather than short-term sales proves key to sustaining advantage in this sector marked by high switching costs and complex customer requirements.

Crisis Resilience

Strong relationship marketing practices equip B2B rubber firms with resilience during crises, such as supply chain disruptions witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research on business-to-business relationship management during turbulent times highlights that firms possessing robust trust and communication networks are better able to maintain order flows and collaborate on contingency plans (Zafari, Biggemann, & Garry, 2020). The concept of mindful relationship management—balancing trust with verification and adaptive interaction—allows firms to rapidly adjust to new realities without breaking client ties (Zafari et al., 2020). This resiliency is crucial in industries like rubber manufacturing, where supply shocks and logistic challenges can cripple production. Established partnerships encourage flexibility, joint problem-solving, and shared risk-taking, mitigating negative impacts of unforeseen events and sustaining operational continuity (Zafari et al., 2020). Such capabilities enhance reputation and client confidence, further deepening long-term loyalty beyond the crisis.

Case Insights (Global & Indian Rubber Sector)

Bridgestone & Natural Rubber Suppliers: Multi-Decade Partnerships Ensure Quality and Supply Continuity

Bridgestone, a global leader in tires and rubber, has long recognized the critical importance of consistent, high-quality natural rubber supplies. While its large-scale investments in plantations and sustainability initiatives expand in more recent years, the foundation of such supply chain continuity lies in its long-term supplier partnerships. For instance, in 2020, Bridgestone launched the W-BRIDGE initiative in Indonesia, a citizen-based reforestation and cultivation program that engaged local communities and supported sustainable rubber sourcing (Waseda University cooperation). These long-standing community and stakeholder partnerships enable Bridgestone to build relational capital, ensuring steady access to natural rubber while fostering trust and stability through extended collaboration.

Although explicit academic case studies on Bridgestone's multi-decade supplier relationships are limited, its involvement with community-based reforestation, training programs, and capacity building underscores its strategy of embedding trust with suppliers and communities. By delivering technical training, improved seedlings, and cultivation guidance, Bridgestone strengthens both the quality of raw material and its reputational ties with suppliers, leading to reliable, long-term sourcing arrangements—all indicative of relationship marketing in action.

Apollo Tyres (India): Investing in Farmer Training for Sustainable Rubber Sourcing and Supplier Relationships

Apollo Tyres demonstrates how investing in community development and farmer capability can reinforce strategic buyer-supplier partnerships. A corporate video published by the company highlights its sustainable supply chain model: working closely with tapping communities and the Rubber Board of India, Apollo delivers training, support for alternate livelihoods (such as beekeeping), and women's empowerment initiatives, all aimed at building trust and socioeconomic stability among rubber producers. These efforts exemplify relationship marketing beyond purely transactional exchanges—by enabling steady income streams and livelihood diversification for farmers, Apollo cultivates long-term loyalty and alignment with its supply chain.

Though more recent sustainability commitments like sourcing 100% sustainable rubber in Europe are available, these post-date 2019. However, the documented farmer-focused training programs up to 2020 clearly illustrate Apollo's relational strategy: building capability, trust, and mutual benefit with suppliers to secure consistent quality and ethical sourcing.

Sri Trang Agro-Industry (Thailand): Relationship Marketing with Downstream Manufacturers

Sri Trang Agro-Industry (STA), a major integrated natural rubber firm in Thailand, has leveraged scale, sustainability, and transparency to strengthen its relationships with global downstream buyers. By 2019, STA had already grown to operate extensive plantations and midstream processing facilities—solidifying its capacity to serve global markets with reliability and quality. Its leadership in the rubber supply chain enabled STA to reinforce buyer partnerships through operational consistency, supply volume, and integrated capabilities.

Additionally, while its formal membership in the Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber (GPSNR) occurred post-2019, STA's emphasis on ESG and digitally transparent systems had already positioned it as a trusted supplier (Sri Trang Ecosystem). These systems likely contributed to building stronger relational ties by offering traceability and sustainability assurances to clients—key elements of relationship marketing. STA's strategic scale, integrated capability, and sustainability orientation reflect how large-scale producers can foster deep, value-based bonds with downstream manufacturers.

CONCLUSION

The analysis underscores that relationship marketing is not merely an alternative to traditional transactional approaches; rather, it is a strategic necessity in B2B industries such as rubber, where dependency, customization, and quality demands are exceptionally high. The dynamics of the rubber sector—dominated by its close ties to automotive, construction, and healthcare industries—make trust, collaboration, and long-term commitments vital to sustaining performance and competitiveness. Suppliers and buyers are bound not only by contracts but also by their ability to co-create solutions and manage risks jointly, which forms the cornerstone of relationship marketing practices.

A close examination of literature and practice reveals that trust and commitment are the most critical antecedents in fostering durable supplier–buyer bonds. Empirical studies affirm that these relational elements enhance customer loyalty, reduce switching risks, and encourage open channels of communication. In the rubber sector, where technical precision and safety compliance cannot be compromised, these relational factors become decisive in ensuring consistent supply and retaining long-term clients. Furthermore, suppliers who prioritize customer-centric strategies and invest in joint innovation build strong differentiation, gaining advantages that cannot be replicated solely through competitive pricing.

Relationship marketing also plays a crucial role in mitigating uncertainties that frequently arise from fluctuations in natural rubber prices and global logistics challenges. Collaborative arrangements such as long-term contracts, risk-sharing mechanisms, and integrated supply chain systems allow firms to cushion themselves against volatility. This resilience enhances not only operational continuity but also client trust, thereby protecting supplier–buyer relationships during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The role of sustainability in relationship building is equally important; initiatives like eco-conscious sourcing, transparent communication, and capacity-building activities strengthen relational capital while complying with emerging global regulatory expectations. Case insights from industry leaders such as Bridgestone, Apollo Tyres, and Sri Trang Agro-Industry demonstrate that relationship marketing in practice encompasses extensive community engagement, technological collaboration, and ethical sourcing—all of which reinforce long-term value for both suppliers and clients.

Ultimately, the study concludes that relationship marketing in the B2B rubber industry is a multidimensional strategy that enhances competitiveness, ensures revenue stability, promotes innovation, and strengthens overall supply chain resilience. Firms that adopt this orientation move beyond transactional exchanges and reposition themselves as indispensable partners. By embedding trust, commitment, and co-created value into their business models, rubber suppliers can secure lasting strategic advantage and navigate the complexities of the global market with greater adaptability and success.

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